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ABSTRACT

In helping children cope with death, teachers must facilitate children's passing through the physiological and psychological processes of grieving. Standard protocols can be established in order to develop a range of possible crisis intervention methods. The teacher's first role in the moments of shock and confusion which follow a sudden death is to help children feel safe. The teacher should explain the situation in terms children can understand, and thus establish a basis for dialogue about the incident itself and about the emotions children are feeling. Three main tasks should be part of any crisis response: (1) acknowledging the event's reality; (2) establishing an environment in which children feel comfortable in talking about their feelings; and (3) providing appropriate curricular materials and learning opportunities so that children can comprehend what has happened. Teachers should (1) be good listeners, (2) share information about the event and about their own feelings openly, (3) answer children's questions truthfully, (4) reinforce children's understanding that death is a difficult thing with which to cope and that confusion and anxiety at times of death are normal, and (4) acknowledge that death is part of life. Contains 13 references. (JW)

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Responding to a Bereaved Child in the School Setting

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Responding to a Bereaved Child in the School Setting

To experience bereavement is to respond to a significant loss. In the course of a school year, young children may encounter different forms of loss that affect them either directly or indirectly in school related matters. Examples may include the death of a family member, close relative or acquaintance, a school friend or classmate, a teacher or school administrator, the death of an animal companion, or a national figure which has meaning to the children. Other forms of loss and/or separation capable of creating considerable stress among school-age children include the divorce of parents, relocation of the family residence, loss of a job by one or both parents, or good friends who move to another geographic location. Not all loss is the same and thus a variety of factors may determine how a young person reacts to it. This article focuses on loss brought about through death and identifies appropriate actions required among teachers toward responding to it within an educational environment.

Death is a major life event and adults must do what they can to clarify relevant concepts and assist children in their attempts to understand and manage it. Almost two decades ago Gordon and Klass (1979) drew our attention to dilemmas faced by young people in this way:

"(Children) grow up in a time when the sight of natural death has been banished from everyday living but in a time when the nuclear bomb and the Nazi holocaust have made death more familiar than at any time since the plague of the fourteenth century. They see violent death portrayed on film, TV physicians performing miraculous cures for those deserving to live, and death as a punishment for evil deeds. Science promises a cure for human suffering. The media promote happiness as an ultimate goal and right, yet the students know that death is real, that sometimes death involves suffering, and that death can cause unhappiness" (p. 75).

Situations concerning death are part of all life and occur on a regular basis in the lives of children. When a child experiences a death such as a close relative, a good friend, or a school classmate it is wise for the teacher and/or counselor to respond in a facilitative mode toward assisting the student in managing psychological and physiological manifestations collectively referred to as the grief response. An appropriate response may be the product of a well thought out plan, one that has been crafted and promulgated by a school leadership team, or it could represent a spontaneous, "teachable moment" event that draws upon the wisdom and experience of a teacher. The appropriateness of a teacher's response will vary according to the nature of the school. Public schools may represent parents and children of greatly diverse theological and philosophical attitudes and beliefs about death. Sensitivity to different understanding about death will shape a school's official response.

The degree of shock, hurt, anger, denial and other commonly observed emotions generated through death will generally depend upon several factors including the child's age, experience with and understanding of death (Spence &

Brent, 1995), relationship of the deceased to the child, type and nature of death, and the strength of the support group surrounding the child, among others. Just as with adults, no two children necessarily respond the same way to loss through death. While the management of death may be a minor issue for one child, it could present major problems for another. Consequently, no two children should be treated quite the same during the grief response period. For a comprehensive analysis of a child's coping ability including a thorough review of the literature on children's understanding of death, see the edited work by Corr and Corr (1995).

Crisis Intervention

Within the academic setting, the overall plan to be carried out by teachers and/or counselors in responding to a critical incident, such as the death of a meaningful other, represents a fairly standard protocol. However, a quick response is required should an immediate crisis develop within the school community due to incidents such as the train-school bus collision near Chicago in late October of 1995 that took the lives of seven or so students, a succession of student suicides within a relative short time period, or students being held as hostages by a gun-toting, mentally deranged person. Or should a critical moment occur within the school facility due to sudden death of a student, teacher, or administrator from some physical anomaly, accident, self-destructive behavior, or violence, it is then necessary to employ an intervention strategy.

During early and intense moments of shock, disbelief, and confusion brought about by sudden death, it is imperative that the adult leader take charge, allay major fears that may have been generated, and assure young children that they are safe and protected. It is also important to quickly identify what happened and how it happened including a brief explanation as to causation, and then set the stage for further analysis and discussion. Many school systems have put into place crises intervention teams comprised of various professionals and lay persons for the purpose of responding quickly with an array of supporting resources. Such quick-strike teams are designed to handle issues that impact large numbers of students and they have proven to be very effective in the early stages toward restoring equilibrium within the school. The extent and complexity of an intervention process will vary with the type of incident that must be addressed. For excellent resources on the management of school crises consult Metzgar & Guest (1992), Stevenson (1994), and Stevenson & Powers (1986).

Beyond the intervention phase of responding to a crisis situation which may or may not include death, three additional tasks should be completed under the guidance of a competent leader for situations involving loss through death. These tasks have been identified by Evans (1982) in sequential order as: (1) acknowledging the reality of the event; (2) providing an environment in which children feel safe and comfortable discussing their feelings; and (3) the provision of appropriate learning and curricular experiences so as to promote a full understanding of the event and conditions surrounding its occurrence.

Acknowledging the Reality of Loss

Many school children throughout the country will be impacted by death at some point in time of the school year. Other school children will not directly encounter loss through death in early life and will perhaps move into middle adulthood before experiencing death of a significant other. Yet, they too are affected when their classmates suffer loss. Teachers should not ignore the significance of any death event. To do so can create grave problems for bereaved children.

For those who report to school having been touched by death, or those who experience it directly within the school facility, they must come to accept the fact that death has occurred, that it is final, and that the student must gradually learn to adapt to an environment devoid of the deceased person. Teachers can promote this goal and facilitate the process by:

1. being a good listener, hearing what the child is saying, and allowing the child to express thoughts, memories, and feelings;
2. sharing openly and honestly with the child information about what happened;
3. answering all questions truthfully and in a manner understood by the child;
4. helping reinforce the notion that loss through death is difficult to handle, that it hurts and requires time for healing;
5. clarifying conditions surrounding the loss, a process that should minimize the generation of destructive misconceptions; and
6. acknowledging that death including its management is a part of living, that some forms of death are understandable and predictable while others are complicated, unplanned, and difficult to comprehend.

Providing a Safe and Comfortable Environment for Exploring Feelings

Schools should have in place a system designed to assist young learners facing a crisis or loss via death. Authorities remind us that fear and anxiety from loss can affect school children in a negative manner. For example, they may have a shorter attention span and experience more difficulty with academic assignments. Consequently, success in the classroom may be more difficult to achieve and students' grades may suffer as a consequence. In varying degrees, bereaved students may perceive themselves as helpless in coping with loss while giving off signs of depression, increased episodes of daydreaming, and even withdrawal from socialization with their peers (Stevenson, 1994). In fact, death anxieties can be common causes for later pathological behavior (Cruse & Cruse, in press; Gordon & Klass, 1971).

Educators need to be proactive and quick to recognize the fact that young children confronted with loss need help with the early grieving process. While it may be easy to overlook and ignore the fact that a child is bothered by loss due to death, not to respond and provide a supportive environment for the purpose of dealing with it is a disservice to the child. Some guidelines here would be to:

1. Liaise as needed with a child's parents about the issues and circumstances surrounding the loss.

2. Arrange meetings with student and parents, and if necessary, school counselors or school psychologists.
3. Promote open and honest discussions about the incident.
4. Give a child extra time for discussing, remembering, reminiscing.
5. Utilize other students who may have experienced similar loss and who understand, serving as a possible support group.
6. Encourage affected child to open up, talk, and ask relevant questions.
7. Encourage her or him to articulate feelings by writing letters to or about the person who died, or draw pictures on paper should the child be very young as a vehicle for expressing feelings.

Provide Appropriate Learning and Curricular Experiences

Schools represent centers for sharing ideas, testing new concepts, and learning new phenomena. Thus, it should be a safe place to confront and deal with death-related issues. In recent years some schools have implemented formal approaches to death education for children as curricular components. Other schools address the topic of death as needed in response to a significant crisis or as a "teachable moment" occurrence following a death that impacts a child or several children. There are numerous initiatives teachers can launch toward addressing the concepts of dying and death within the school setting. A few of these curricular experiences are identified here. If addressed and/or taught properly, they can be extremely useful in assisting a child or numbers of children confronted with death as well as promoting a better understanding of death as an essential element of the life cycle.

- > Provide for individual and group activities for purposes of sharing and emotional healing. Children who have experienced loss through death can be especially insightful, understanding, and helpful.
- > Develop short pedagogical units that focus on desired outcomes; encourage healthy class discussions and student interaction.
- > Utilize newspaper stories for the purpose of discussing death and its impact on children and others in the community.
- > Utilize science units for the purpose of discussing the life cycle of plants, animals, and human beings. Many aspects of dying and death can be addressed rather appropriately in health education units.
- > Make brief library assignments on relevant topics and have children do written assignments and oral reports.
- > Select appropriate books for children that deal effectively with loss, read to them and have them read selected topics.
- > Participate in selected field trips, i.e., funeral homes and cemeteries, provided they are appropriately planned and approved by school administrators and parents.
- > Invite experts within the community to come and focus on relevant topics. Such excellent resources include funeral directors, doctors, nurses, other health care providers, ministers, lawyers, professors, etc.

Teachers will be more successful helping young children deal with death and learning more about its myriad dimensions if the teacher is both comfortable with and

competent in the subject matter. Over the past 15 years a vast amount of literature and other types of resources have emanated. A few of these are identified in the reference list. We would particularly recommend works by Bernstein (1983), Corr & Corr (1995), Doka (1995), Gordon & Klass (1979), Wass & Corr (1982), and Wolfelt (1983).

Conclusion

As noted, students cannot be shielded from death's reality. Its occurrence is inevitable. Most grief situations necessitate time-on-task in order to manage death's ramifications. Teachers and others within schools can and should play a positive role toward assisting young learners in their efforts to cope with dying, death, and grief. Teachers need to equip themselves with requisite competencies and skills and be ready and willing to assist children in their coping efforts. And as Stevenson (1995) correctly observes, both educators and parents must function in a collaborative mode so as to create in our schools a place where bereaved students and those facing life-threatening illness can find support for their special needs.

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